

## CATALOGUE INTERVIEW

DE-COMMODIFYING THE BODY:  
AN INTERVIEW WITH BARBARA BICKEL AND R. MICHAEL FISHER

*The following interview was conducted on e-mail by Eva Tihanyi.*

**Can you comment on the title of your show, *Elicit Bodies*.**

**BB:** “Bodies” seemed a natural choice since so much of my work is about the body and Michael felt that his circles were bodies as well. Both of our series are in otherworldly/cosmic environments. It is a baffling journey if we try to understand life from solely a logical place. We are not taught ways of distinguishing the mystical from the irrational in our society. Our experiences of the mystical are, for the most part, not validated so we learn to become afraid of them and keep them private. The contemporary art world still has an aversion to anything spiritual and mystical. This is a great loss in my view. We liked the word “elicit”—bringing forth the bodies in sacred context. (We were also playing the “illicit” pun, of course.)

**RMF:** The “body” of the “sphere” (in my case) and “body” of the “human body” (in Barbara’s case) are pre-cultural bodies, bodies that no human created per se. (Of course, we culturally construct them through ideas, but I’m sure the Earth existed spherically long before I named it and learned about it, and so too did the human body.) There is something primordial and inherently ethical in those creations as they were not created originally for “marketing” or “manipulation.” As an artist, I find that “purity” interesting to work with. Barbara and I in our art do a type of “cleansing” of our distortions of perception that are built up with culture and politics and living a life where everything is commodified. That commodification affects all of us and we see “bodies” (as something to buy and sell, etc.). So we are working with the primordial, pre-cultural qualities of these bodies in order to recover “spirit.”

**Is there a particular theme the two of you are exploring?**

**BB:** Both series are about re-translation. I was re-translating women’s trances and Michael was translating the philosophy of Ken Beittel. The visual art is the translation medium. The installation and the performance ritual at the opening, along with the artists’ talk, will be the active collaboration. We both strive to work with integrity which means staying true to the form that we are re-translating: in Michael’s case the sphere, in my case the human body. I do not distort the body, which is already perfect, and Michael does not distort his spheres. This show also makes visible our differences joining together. My underlying relationship with the body is literal whereas Michael’s relationship with the sphere is cosmic. This reflects our personalities. Although at times I work from a “big picture” perspective, I am more particular and grounded in the here and

now in my relationships. Michael, although capable of working from the particular and the here and now, tends more to see things from a universal, larger perspective.

**RMF:** I think there are several themes we are both exploring, as Barbara mentioned. However, until we put these two separate series of art works together in the gallery we won't know which particular theme is going to emerge that both of us will emphasize for Elicit Bodies. I was working with the theme of "spontaneous discipline" from Beittel's art and philosophy which I have been studying for a year. I wanted to apply his Zen-like philosophy to making pots (and living as an artist) to two-dimensional painting and drawing, so I attempted to make "pots" with this series of works using a formula of a "centre" and a "bracket" that was fairly consistent in each piece.

### **How do you define the concept of "body" in terms of your art?**

**BB:** I am fairly literal when it comes to the body. I love the human form and feel the most satisfaction when there is some form of reference to the body in my work. It is the body that entices me in art if it is done with sensitivity and respect. I agree with Thomas Moore: "The body is indeed the temple, not simply for its beauty and value, but because it houses the holy mystery of human existence."

**RMF:** For me, body is like a "content" or "subject" of a work of art, and it is that basic. If I were doing color field painting, for example, there wouldn't be a "body" in the art work. The bodies in this particular series are basically "circles" ("spheres") and that seems pretty innocuous, yet they can appear to some as quite disturbing. At times they embody forces that are beyond our normal sense of categories of the comfortable or predictable and that alone for some is moving toward the illicit (i.e., the uncontrolled, the unregulated, the unpredictable and anxiety-provoking or unknown). I take the body (circle, sphere) that is so standardized and regulated by the all the rules and I put it in a context that deregulates it and "breaks the law," thereby eliciting new responses to the most basic shape in human cultures around the world: the circle.

### **How is this current series of work different from your previous ones?**

**BB:** This series was the first where I worked with a set physical format. All the small pieces are 14 x 14 inches and the larger ones 48 inches in height. It was also the first time I worked with trance with my collaborators. I had been working with trance on my own but had not taken others through a trance process. The trance gave me the narrative to follow while creating the small pieces in particular. Trance being a "waking dream" accessing our subconscious while awake and being witnessed/listened to by another (me/the artist). I listened to these trances as I worked on each triptych and they informed the mood, colour, atmosphere and energy of each piece. For example, the colours in the art were not randomly chosen by me. They came from the trances of the women. My task was to express these trances into a visual medium and story.

**RMF:** This series is very different for me because of the arts-based research approach behind it. Ken Beittel’s meditations on “roundness” and “centering” are all part of the series, a series not motivated by commercial sales or career building. This was an academic/artistic enterprise that I entered, and I guess it was what I needed at the time because my “tank” of inspiration was running on fumes, so to speak. It was nice to work with some artist’s ideas and see how I would interpret them. The circle in the centre of each piece in this series is perplexing and ordinary at the same time, and compositionally is something I would never do in my art. They teach you in art school (or so I’m told) never to centre your main object. So I broke the rule and loved pulling it off. That’s satisfying to the rebel in me, I suppose.

**When a viewer enters *Elicit Bodies* and considers your work—both of your work together in the same space—what do you hope will happen?**

**BB:** The first thought that comes to mind is that I would love people to experience a relationship. One that is an intimate committed relationship willing to share itself with the larger community through art. A crossing of public and private. A relationship that has differences as well as core similarities (not always easily visible). We are not there to create a spectacle of relationship as is found in our media and entertainment, but a conscious spiritual relationship. Whether it is between Michael and I, the co-creators of my series or the relationship of Michael with Beittel via his philosophy.

**RMF:** We are trying to communicate something “sacred” that is not of the everyday world. This involves guiding viewers to some kind of journey experience, beyond mere entertainment, beyond mere salve for the wounds, beyond the trivial and mundane.